

Women and books

As a child I was a slow reader, laboring over the syllables of words and often missing the meaning behind them. But I loved hearing stories, the wash of sounds and rhythms, as my parents read to me from *Childcraft*, large red-bound volumes of illustrated poems and fairy tales. I remember my grandmother tucking me into bed and tucking stories into my heart.

An early recollection is of an illustrated copy of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* with my name on it. Books became familiar objects wrapped in bright paper for Christmas and birthdays. With tomboyish delight I discovered the Hardy Boys mysteries, dabbling in the Nancy Drew series when I ran out of them.

My first awakening to the power of books however, came one summer evening in Ontario. A friend and I were snuggling in sleeping bags in a backyard tent, when she read to me from her favorite book, *Anne of Green Gables*. The language of “kindred spirits” gripped my soul. We shared laughter and tears as together we travelled on that hot Ontario evening to the ocean mists at Green Gables.

Daniel Pennac states in *Better than Life*, “The paradoxical virtue of reading (is that) it takes us out of the world so we may find meaning in it” (Pennac, 17). This describes my childhood wonder and enjoyment in being amused and diverted with stories. With age, however, I began to think of reading in terms of “usefulness.” What could I learn for my life and ministry?

As an English major in college I read to “study” for my courses. Later, in full-time ministry, I read to “grow.” The Bible, missionary biographies and books on living the Christian life were my daily fare. Following a painful ending to full-time

ministry, I read to “heal.” *Toxic Faith, Disappointment with God, and When Your World Makes No Sense* restored some sanity to my troubled world.

Then I found myself drawn back to my childhood “kindred spirit,” *Anne of Green Gables*, finding in it a reawakening of my soul. In a way it was a “coming home.” I am now once again reading for pleasure, seeing books as an “act of constant creation” (Pennac, 25). Oh, usefulness is there, I suppose, but much more wonder, awe and soulcare. For me this is “paradise regained” as I rediscover the power of books to take me “out of the world so that (I) may find meaning in it” (Pennac, 17).

A year after moving back to Canada from California, I met a woman who shared a desire to form a “book club” and thus began for me the powerful combination of women and



books! Madeleine L'Engle writes, "The deep friendships in my life are, for me, what keep the stars in their courses" (L'Engle, 134). Friendships are the place where stories are told, stories of the shaping of our lives, stories of our dreams and losses, stories of love and hate, frustration and joy. The stories of our reading and of our living blend together to provide a place of refuge.

As this issue testifies, reading is an "intentional act of claiming personal time amidst the external demands around us." I have been inspired by women who "carve out a space" in their lives for reading and for sharing with other women. The books women find to enjoy are as varied as women themselves. Many women who contributed to this issue were unsure how to divide their reading into "faith" and "pleasure" because the two overlapped. Others did not know how to narrow their reading lists since each book had impacted them in some way.

Some were struck by our privilege of being literate and having access to good books. Sisters the world over have the same yearnings, the same love of stories, the same need for space, yet have less opportunities. How can our reading and connecting with women here reach out to them? Perhaps we can find ways to provide literacy and libraries for others.

I am deeply grateful for the gift of books and women friends. Many thanks to those who have told of their encounters with both in this issue. Women have contributed their lists of "favorite" books and the value they have found in readers' groups. Feature articles focus on the powerful and sometimes subversive combination of "women and text" and on how this combination inspires women's book clubs. Another article provides practical tips on how to begin a readers' group. Special thanks to Maryann Tjart Jantzen for her assistance in compiling this report.

I have been inspired. I can't wait to finish this project and curl up with a good book! Happy Reading!
—Janet E. Boldt, compiler

Notes

L'Engle, Madeleine. *The Rock That Is Higher*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1993.

Pennac, Daniel. *Better Than Life*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994.

Janet E. Boldt is an instructor at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, B.C., and attends Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship in Vancouver. Good friends, good books and good coffee are a favorite combination for her.

Comments on books

"Susan Howatch writes psychological novels about priests and sinners in the Anglican Church which offer plenty of intrigue and provide insight into the inner workings of would-be saints: *Mystical Powers*, *Glittering Images*, *Glamorous Powers*, *Scandalous Risks*."

—Lee Snyder

"George Eliot's *Why Shoot the Teacher?* is a delightful story of depression days in Saskatchewan. Lots of hardships with school, students, cold weather, all told with great humour."

—Marion McGee

"*Shot in the Heart* by Mikal Tilmore is an honest account of how humans struggle in relationships, a theme affecting all of our lives."

—Lydia Doerksen

"*The Concubine's Children* by Denise Chong is a 'meticulously researched social and political history' (*The Globe and Mail* review) and the very personal story of three generations of Chinese-Canadian people. I recognize the names of some of my own relatives and some of the city streets I remember from my childhood. This book has helped me to reflect on my family and background and how they shape who I am today. That's really one of the reasons I read: to reflect on and to enrich my understanding of myself and the world in which I live."

—April Yamasaki

"Virginia Mollenkott's *Women, Men and the Bible* first opened my eyes to interpreting the Bible in a way liberating to women. I have since read additional books that have even more significantly influenced me including *Beyond the Curse*, by Aida Besancon Spencer; *Ungodly Women*, by Betty Deberg; *Women at the Crossroads*, by Kari Torjesen Malcolm; and *Women's Reality*, by Anne Wilson Schaef."

—Harriet Sider Bicksler

"I'm amazed how often one book will touch on an issue I've read in another book; the interconnectedness, unplanned and unexpected, is an affirmation to me of the joy of reading and the rewards found in sharing this joy with my friends."

—Marjorie Bergen Warkentin

"*In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought*, edited by Amy Oden, is a collection of writings reflecting female Christian scholarship from as early as 100 C.E. up until the 1940s. Works by Hildegard of Bingen, Claire of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Ann Lee, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and many others encourage those who are tired of thinking Christian scholarship is a male field of interest. There have always been women theologians, and *In Her Words* is a testimony to them."

—Chris Klassen

"I mention it shyly, fearing that I will be met with derisive hoots, but I'm awfully fond of a sub-genre I suppose could be called the 'teenage romance novel' published from the late 1940s through the 1960s. These books are sweetly predictable stories about the hazards of growing up where girls meet boys, take part-time jobs and attend sporting events and dances. Of course, they're often laughably off-target and outdated (nice kids always win) but I don't read them for their realism. These books sound themes such as self-respect, the value of work, the importance of friendship, the process of making difficult decisions, integrity, faithfulness and overcoming disappointment."

"Among the best are Anne Emergy, *Sorority Girl*; Beverly Cleary, *Fifteen* and *Jean and Johnny*; Maureen Daly, *Seventeenth Summer*; Zoa Sherburne, *The Girl in the Mirror*, *Almost April* and *A Stranger in the House*. I believe these books provide a documentary of a period of rapidly growing prosperity in the postwar United States. Perhaps they're baby boomer morality tales. They're easy to laugh at, and I do, but I also find them entertaining, comforting and oddly helpful. Try one sometime."

—Mary Raber

"Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is an astounding work, providing insight into girls growing up. The narrative is brutally honest, portraying the excruciating pain girls often endure in their relationships."

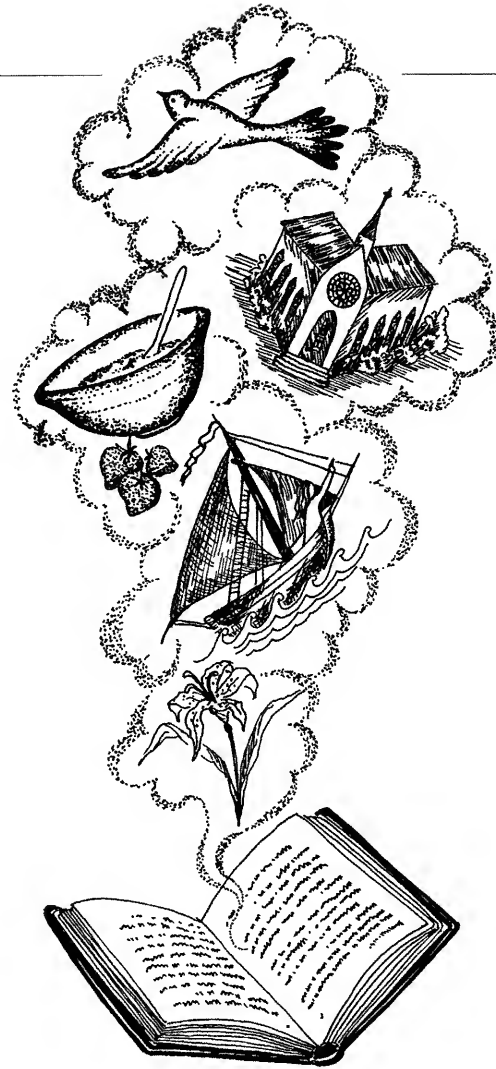
—Lee Snyder

"*Healing Life's Hurts* written by Dennis Linn and Matthew Linn, two Catholic priests, showed me how to bring my pain (and rage) to God to be healed, a process and awareness that changed my life. This book helped me to be honest with God and with myself."

—Jeanne Houser

"I am an elementary school social worker. I have benefitted from the wisdom of Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia* and *The Shelter of Each Other*. Sometimes as a social worker, I feel despair about the pain and suffering around me. This last book provided hope and a clearer vision of the importance and strength of families."

—Jeanne Houser



"A good book is a refuge for me. I feel unfocused, at loose ends, restless if I do not have a book or two 'on the go.'"
—Marjorie Bergen Warkentin

by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

Growing into words

Her impoverished parents came from war and famine seeking a new life in British Columbia's Fraser Valley. Settling on a dairy farm, they began to reconstruct their lives. By the time their daughter arrived, they had achieved a modicum of economic security, providing a stable home within the context of a larger faith community.

As a small child, she was rarely alone, cared for in an extended family setting. At bedtime, her busy mother would take time to read her Bible stories. As an older child, she would arrive home after school to a kitchen fragrant with the aromas of fresh baked *zwieback* (buns) and simmering *bonen suppa* (bean soup). Her days were spent in peace and safety, often wandering around the farm. And she received spiritual instruction, by example and articulation, both at home and in the faith community.

But she also possessed an inherent intellectual curiosity. And this need her parents could not fully meet, given the harsh realities of their lives. Deprived of education and economic security, they had of necessity sacrificed thought to survival, imagination to pragmatism.

At age six, she went to school, full of apprehension and excitement. Halfway through grade one, she began to read fluently. And so began an intellectual journey not shared with her family. Once able to decipher the magic signs that constructed meaning through words, she no longer asked her mother to read to her. Soon her room was full of books, borrowed from the school or church library, or most delightful of all, purchased with her own money or received as treasured Christmas gifts. New worlds, foreign and intriguing, unfolded before her. The frigid wilderness of Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. Deserted jungle islands. The red-stained streets of revolutionary Paris. The strange submarine world of Captain Nemo and his crew in *A Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. She read a hodgepodge of texts, from the mundane to the mysterious, from the superficial to the sublime. The pedestrian Danny Orlis and Nancy Drew series, the exotic ambience of *Treasure Island*, the bizarre world of *Alice in Wonderland*, Louisa May Alcott's heartwarming *Little Women*, Sally Lee Bell's sentimental "Christian" romances. Missionary tales of the South American jungle. The *World Book Encyclopedia*, which became her sex education manual. All full of interest and intrigue.

Before long her parents became anxious, for she had read all the books in the children's section of the church library and was rapidly progressing through the "adult" section. The pastor reassured them that nothing in the church library could be harmful. Growing older, she purchased "secular" books at garage sales, some of which she read in secret, sure her parents would not approve. Through these she learned about the potential for both good and depravity in humankind. The public library with its ocean of books became another voyage of discovery.

And so I was liberated into the realm of books. There I found a doorway into another world stretching far beyond the confines of our small farm. Opportunities for intellectual and imaginative growth that my culture-bound parents and church could not provide opened through my reading. This world of the imagination and the intellect would much later influence my choice to become a post-secondary teacher of literature.

Growing up with neither siblings near my age nor friends nearby, books became my companions, my initiators into the larger realities of life. Even now, asked to choose basics essential to survival, after food and clothing I would choose books: fat, meaty volumes that could nourish my mind and soul. The Bible, of course. And Shakespeare's collected works. Perhaps the 5000-page, two-volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. And how could I leave behind Jane Austen's collected works? And so on.

We all construct the realities of our lives according to the contexts that surround and impact us. I'm privileged to have had books as primary shapers of my life. I've often looked first to books rather than people to help me find answers to the "big" questions of life. Not until I was an adult did I begin to realize that books can sometimes present very distorted realities. But the critical capability to understand this also grew out of my interaction with the printed text.

How this happened I don't rationally understand. My gaining of wisdom through books was intuitive, unorganized, fragmented but stimulating and enriching. I certainly did not only read "quality" materials as a child (some of the "Christian" novels I encountered presented an

**"I like to read widely, as
widely as life itself."
—April Yamasaki**

extremely reductive view of reality!). But I read diversely enough so that, despite the constricted parameters of my life, I acquired an ability to look for the "bigger picture" and to value the imagination, despite its seeming pragmatically useless. My lifelong encounter with written texts has also helped me to understand the need for a metaperspective, a larger vision which will help me to critique my own contexts and perspectives even while being shaped by them.

In the beginning of the introductory literature course I teach, I ask my students to tell me a little about their lives. Where are they from? What are their goals and dreams as they enter university? When they have listened to each others' stories, I tell them these have an affinity with the books we will study. Just as they come to know each other better through their stories, engaging narrative will enable them to know



themselves, others and the world better. This will happen through the validation or challenge of their perspective realities as they confront fictionally constructed worlds. And if they give themselves over to the task of truly entering into the text, of learning to read interpretively for meaning, they will encounter other realities that will teach them more about themselves and their own contexts.

Therefore, in reading about the status-obsessed 19th century society of de Maupassant's cynical story, "The Jewelry," they will not only learn about the values of a foreign culture but also something about the 20th century materialism that has shaped their own lives. As they come to recognize the restricted gender expectations placed upon the female protagonist in Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls," set in 1940s rural Ontario, they might have their own conceptions of what it means to be "only a girl" challenged by Munro's subtle ironies. Without ever setting foot in the ghettos of New York, they can gain understanding through the reading of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," into why someone might turn to heroin to escape the chaos of the "smothering" streets.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thus declares the Gospel of John, articulating God's divinely appointed method of bringing meaning into our lives through Christ, the Logos who holds all things together. Although it reflects only in an imperfect way that divine Word, God has graced us with human language. Our ability to construct meaning through language is part of being made in the image of God. Thus we should not be surprised about how important words can be for us. Imagined words, spoken words, words sung or chanted. And most of all, words strung together into meaningful texts, encouraging us, challenging us, informing us. And yes, at times upsetting, even deceiving us. But through it all, if we pay careful attention to what we read, we will learn to be discerning interpreters of all the texts we encounter, both lived and written.

Maryann Tjart Jantzen teaches English at Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C., in addition to gardening, reading, parenting, writing and helping with the family business. She attends Highland Community Church.



by Eileen Klassen Hamm

Readers' groups

I love books. I might as well get that out in the open right away. I love the feel of books, the crispness of new pages, the comfort of pages often read, the mysteries and wisdom held within them and the reassuring weight of it all in my backpack. So for me to find other women who are interested in sharing their books is wonderful and lifegiving.

Recently, I have been involved in two readers' groups. The first is a group of about eight women who carve out a space for themselves each month and slowly work together through a book, exploring themes reflected in their own lives. This group has become intimate and comfortable, a safe abode from which to explore the uneasy fragments of our lives.

The second readers' group consists of a dozen women who meet every four to six weeks to discuss a different book. Our repertoire has been wonderfully varied, including short stories, novels, cookbooks, parenting guides, children's books and more. Most have some historical connection to others in the group and most of us have small children.

Why are women drawn together around books? First of all, I believe women are drawn to other women. We are learning to respect our own lives. We need and want the company of other women who can help us more clearly understand individual and shared experiences. And what do books contribute to this process? They provide a safe entry point into a group. Reading books is a legitimate activity in our society, so getting together with others who read books must also be okay.

But I think there is more. Some of us are isolated physically, emotionally or spiritually. And books, though they seem inanimate, can create connections for us. The physical act of sitting down to read is an intentional act of claiming personal time amidst our many external demands. Even this seemingly small personal experience can connect some of the fragments of our lives, bringing renewal and rejuvenation. When we bring this personal experience to a readers' group, we again intentionally create space for broader connections. The inanimate book has brought us face to face with living relationships.

I have been deeply moved by the caring that happens in readers' groups. We seem to become more grounded after taking a few minutes or hours each week to read; we have remembered, even if only briefly, what is truly important in our lives. I love the laughing and crying and sharing that happens.

I have also much enjoyed what I will call our discoveries of mutual subversion. As we begin to explore how themes in books impact or illustrate our lives, we slowly realize that others have similar queries. What we first understood to be only our own unease or our own wild theory is, we discover, shared by others in the group. We are not alone in our frustrations or our desires.

The women in these groups have brought me new worlds: their life stories and the worlds of books I would not have chosen on my own. I have been given fresh perspectives, clear insights, entertaining escapes and love. I have learned greater patience, cultivated a more caring heart and gleaned a small amount of wisdom.

One book experience which illustrates some of these thoughts is Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning*. This book, written by a woman from rural southwest Saskatchewan, is a nonfictional exploration of alienation, spirituality and a search for meaning in the prairie landscape. Reading this book was a powerful experience of "coming home" to myself and my landscape. I did not want this book to end. But, I was wary of bringing this experience to my readers' group. What if my private "aha" did not resonate with anyone else? Would my fragile new vision come tumbling down? Well, not everyone resonated with my ecstatic testimony about this book, but a few women did, and that was enough to encourage me to continue exploring the intertwined threads of spirituality and nature taking shape for me through this book.

We are privileged to have such ready access to good books. I often wonder how I can be a good steward of this privilege. Perhaps readers' groups can play a part in broadening the impact of good books, spreading ripples of wisdom and laughter into our communities and beyond.

Eileen Klassen Hamm lives in Saskatoon, Sask., with her partner Les and their children Simon and Emily. When she is not shovelling snow or searching for mittens, she enjoys making food for friends, reading any and everything, and gardening. Eileen works part-time for MCC Saskatchewan Women's Concerns, and attends Wildwood Mennonite Church.

"The ratio of time available in one's life for reading compared to the number of books which cry out to be read is so small. Ways to enlarge that time, for me, include avoiding television and too many magazines."

—Janice Kreider

Comments on reading groups

"Reading (books, articles, whatever) is my entrée into journaling and a spiritual discipline which grows out of time set aside to read, reflect and write. Close friends and I share books, read each other's referrals and sometimes stumble on wonderful things that we cannot resist passing on to others. Some of my reading 'soulmates' are my best friends."

—Lee Snyder

"I have been a part of a book club for many years, an experience that has most certainly expanded my knowledge. I have learned about culture in India, Africa and China. Books have stimulated me and made me aware of life and living and difficulties in other countries."

—Marion McGee

"More than 12 years ago I was invited to a neighborhood women's book club, and I've been attending monthly book club meetings ever since. We discuss a different book every month, reading a lot of the better contemporary fiction, along with nonfiction and, occasionally, classics. These are highly educated, articulate and fairly liberal upper middle-class women—a very different social scene from my own more conservative Brethren in Christ background, an exposure to another view of the world—and enlightening, enriching and educational."

—Harriet Sider Bicksler

"Becoming part of a book group has emphasized to me the value of reading fiction. In the past, I read minimal fiction because I thought it more valuable and instructive to read biography or more 'serious' books."

—Janice Kreider

"A book club feeds my dreams. I was part of a book club made up of about eight friends working on an older adult psychiatric unit in Chicago. The rules for our club were simple: We picked only novels, we couldn't talk about the book until the club date, and we didn't talk about the unit where we worked (very much). Oh yes, and we ate. We loved books and several of us were on the lookout for new treasures. The club was full of life and joy and delight in words. Then I moved away because of health problems. Now I am living a largely solitary life, and I am writing. I keep the memory of the book club in mind. Perhaps some day people will read my books in a similar circle."

—Christine Wiebe

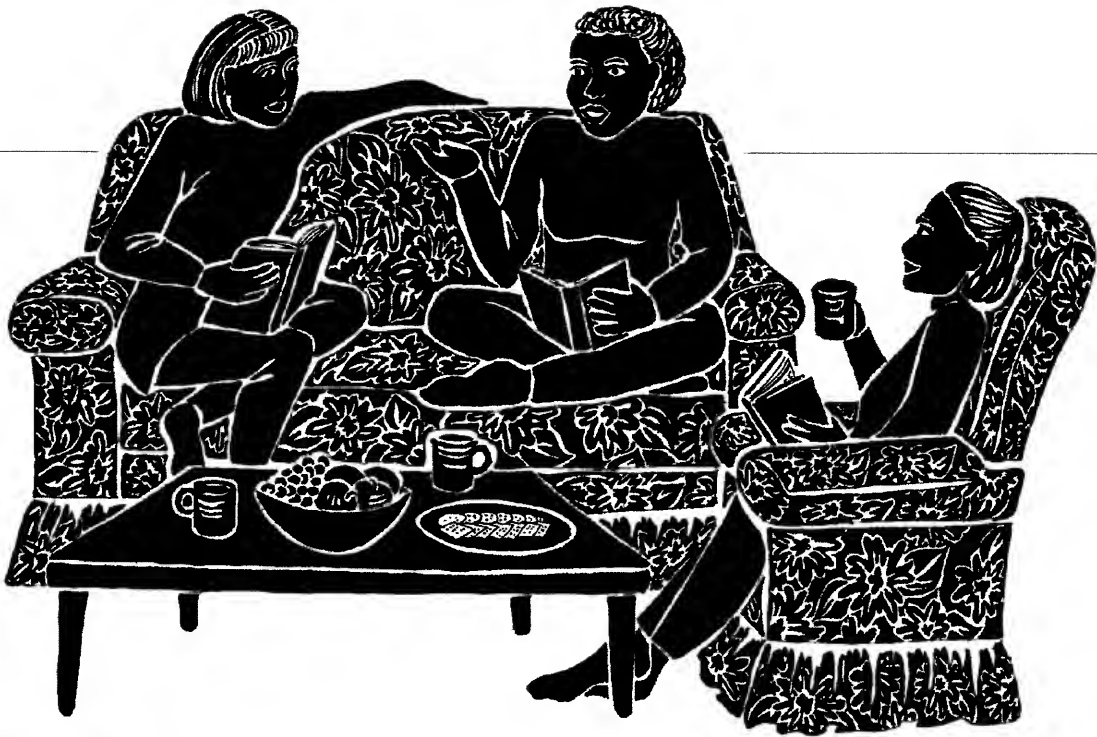
"Readers' group exposes me to new authors and titles, encourages me to read books I may not otherwise read and enlarges my appreciation for a variety of styles. Our discussions stimulate questions and help me think critically. A book is a connection between myself and other women, an intensely personal bond that strengthens our friendship. Sharing a descriptive paragraph and laughing together is a warm and intimate experience."

—Marjorie Bergen Warkentin

The PHALO Book Club of Goshen, Indiana, has been in existence for over 80 years. The wives of faculty at Goshen College began meeting together in the early 1900s to study Philosophy, History, Art, Literature and Oratory, hence the name. They endured through a difficult church split and for many years drew 10 members from the General Conference church, and 10 from the Old Mennonite church. The PHALO Club continues to meet together monthly.

—From information provided by Virginia Kreider





by Joy Hofer

Building friendships through books: The Kerckhoff women's group

The Kerckhoff women's group consists of eight to 10 women who live in Southeast Fresno. Several of us have been here for over 20 years. We have stayed in this downtown neighborhood through thick and thin, as the wealth of the city has moved north. The churches moved north and so did most of the middle class. We stayed.

Kerckhoff Avenue is a beautiful, wide street lined with 80-foot palm trees, with houses dating back to the 1920s and '30s. The Kerckhoff Community is a loosely defined group of about 30 families living in the area. The families are associated with Mennonite churches; many work at Fresno Pacific University or Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. The community has gathered every week since the early 1970s for a potluck meal. Special friendships have developed among its members. We celebrate the holidays together, including an annual carol sing and Easter breakfast.

Out of this context the Kerckhoff women's group began in the fall of 1992. First we met to talk about common concerns, then decided to read books out loud together. Recently we have been discussing a variety of readings selected by individual members. Probably the most important part of our time together is when we pray for each other and the larger world.

The group is about so much more than just reading books together. We are sisters, neighbors and longtime friends. We have mothered each other's children and carried each other's burdens as we walk the difficult paths of our individual lives.

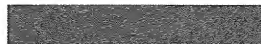
At a recent meeting I asked what was important about being part of this group. Present that night were Nancy Barber, Leanna Wiens, Joyce Braun, Dee Robb and Carol Friesen.

We talked about the significance of meeting with a group of women. Intimate relationships, substantial conversations, spiritual nurture and a respite from daily child care all emerged as important. Dee commented, "I'm envious of what I saw in the film *An American Quilt*: a group of women close to each other. There's something that happens to your soul when you have such close friendships with women. In this women's group we know each other's junk and care about it."

We also discussed the value of studying books together. Carol

"Reading for relaxation and reading books that might be thought of more directly as speaking to my soul are activities that involve the heart, mind and being. In my experience these categories cannot really be separated. The mystery and wonder of how and when books find us (as much as vice versa) still overwhelms me. It might be a detective novel or it might be the biography of a mystic."

—Lee Snyder



Recommended authors . . .

Madeleine L'Engle	Elizabeth Peters
Robertson Davies	James Michener
Margaret Atwood	Georgette Heyer
Toni Morrison	Dick Francis
Anne Tyler	Dorothy L. Sayers
Annie Dillard	Elizabeth Tey
Henri Nouwen	Anne MacCaffrey
Fredrich Buechner	Amanda Cross
Martha Grimes	Agatha Christie
Tony Hillemon	P.D. James
Ellis Peters	Abraham Heschel

We also discussed the value of studying books together. Carol reflected, "I realized I was on a completely different vocabulary level than others in this group. I wouldn't have read many of the books chosen. Discussing these books gave me new insights. I don't think I would have ever cracked open *Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore." To this Joyce responded, "I think we all helped each other through that one!"

The Kerckhoff women's group is a very important part of my life. Books are also very important to me. A crucial concern many of us share is "respite from our busyness," especially in the fragmented and frenetic lives so many of us lead. The Kerckhoff women's group is the medicine for that ailment in my soul.

Joy Hofer has been director of public relations at Fresno Pacific University for the past two years. She worked for 12 years with MCC in Guatemala, the Philippines and Akron, Pa. More recently she worked as director of a large refugee resettlement agency in Fresno, Calif. Joy and Phil have two children, Emily and Jeremy.

These are not all of the authors recommended by contributors. Other recommended authors listed in this issue are designated by cultural background for readers who are interested in books coming from a particular experience.



"I admit it, I have a passion for books (and chocolate). Alan Cheuse says it better than I can: 'It may well be that putting together in our own minds a lifetime of novel reading is close to knowing what it must be like in the mind of God. . . . Think of reading then as an act of praise, of prayer, even, in which individuals reassert their devotion to creation and to the immanent world in which we reside.'" (Antioch Review, Fall 1993, as quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 8, 1993).

—Lee Snyder



More comments on books

"I read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the late '60s. It articulated things which I had not thought through. Reading that book led me to read more secular feminist books since I wasn't closely involved with a church at the time. Integrating feminism with Christianity probably began with reading Letha D. Scanzoni's *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, and Elizabeth Fiorenza's *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*."

—Janice Kreider

"About 10 years ago I went on a personal retreat. My pastor gave me an article to read, and I took two books out of the church library. After reading "Knowing the Will of God," *The 25 Hour Woman* by Sybil Stanton and *Ordering Your Private World* by Gordon MacDonald I made some decisions that changed my life. MacDonald reinforced that my mind was an incredible gift I was allowing to go soft. The article about the will of God stated that sometimes God brings about a restlessness to get a person's attention. Stanton's book on time management helped me see a need for a focus in my life and caused me to ask myself, 'What is my purpose in life?' As a result of this week of reading and journaling, I looked at my dreams and my gifts and abilities, wrote up some goals for myself, and changed my future."

—Dorothy Martens

Cloister Walk is the record of Kathleen Norris' stay with the monks in a Benedictine monastery where she learned the beauty and meaning of liturgy. Liturgy called her back to prayer after years of finding her spiritual resources outside the church. She discovered the wisdom of those who choose to be celibate, and the meaning behind the rules of a monastery. Norris' writing speaks to me because she pays attention; she is a poet as well as an essayist. And she has made peace with living in a small town in South Dakota. She gives me courage to accept my state; I live in Kansas after many years in Chicago."

—Christine Wiebe

"I do love to read and am fascinated by authors who can use words in such ways that cause me to go 'aha' or to identify intimately with their experiences. One of my all-time favorite authors is Madeleine L'Engle. Her Genesis trilogy (*And It Was Good*, *A Stone for a Pillow*, and *Sold Into Egypt*) makes Bible characters come alive and speaks to controversial issues. *The Rock that is Higher* validated my love of reading—something I occasionally have pangs of guilt about—as a good and necessary way to understand life. I come back to *The Irrational Season* often as preparatory reading whenever I plan a special service for our church. L'Engle reminds me of the mystery that is part of my faith and helps me keep believing in spite of the essential contradictions that exist."

—Phyllis Horst Nofziger

"... *And the Ladies of the Club*' by Helen Hooven Santmyer is a long, leisurely read for a relaxing vacation. Set in small-town Ohio, this 1,433-page novel uses the history of the Waynesboro Women's Club, which meets at regular intervals to promote an interest in culture, letters and poetry from 1868 to 1929, as a framework to explore the loves, trials, triumphs and tragedies of its members. A must read for all members of book groups!"

—Maryann Tjart Janztent

"I thought choosing favorites was going to be an easy assignment since I have been an avid reader for as long as I can remember. However, I had a hard time deciding which of the many books are my favorite ones. . . . There is hardly a book which I did not consider worth the time I spent reading it."
—Ingrid Janzen Lamp

"Virginia Kreider inspires me. She began seriously reading when her husband was drafted and hasn't stopped since. She reads a book or two weekly. A number of years ago she came across a list of 100 classics a person should read to have a background in literature. She has read through most of these. Her tastes are diverse. Some favorite authors are Merton, Rousseau, Milton, Voltaire, Pascal and Adler. She loves anything that 'tells me about what a person believes. I can find God in just about any book.' She especially enjoys books by Jewish writers, citing Abraham Heschel as a favorite. She reads Midwestern writers such as Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, and she enjoyed *A Walk Through Europe* by John Hilloby, *The Closing of the American Mind* by Alan Bloom and *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner. *Bridges of Madison County* and books by Umberto Eco round out her reading. She keeps a list of all the books she reads and the date she completed each one, with stars next to those she especially appreciated. When she reads a book, and finds other books mentioned that impacted on that author, she reads those too."

—Janet E. Boldt

More recommended authors . . .

Authors listed below are designated by cultural background for readers who are interested in books coming from a particular experience.

African-American

Dorothy West
Lorene Carey
Toni Morrison
Alice Walker
Zora Neale Hurston

Native America

Michael Dorris
Louise Erdrich

Aboriginal Canadian

Thomas King
Lee Maracle
Thompson Highway

American South

Clyde Edgerton
Ferrol Sams

Pacific Northwest

Annie Dillard
David Guterson

Midwest and Southwest

Barbara Kingsolver
Willa Cather
Larry McMurtry
Cormac McCarthy
Sherwood Anderson

European Mennonite origin

Sarah Klassen
David Bergen
Rudy Wiebe
Di Brandt
David Waltner Toews
Anne Konrad

Ireland

Roddy Doyle

England

P.D. James
Barbara Pym
Muriel Spark

South Africa

Nadine Gordimer

Japan

Kenzaburo Oe
Kazuo Ishiguro

Central America

Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Rigoberta Manchu

Vietnam

Le Ly Hayslip

New Zealand

Keri Hulme

"I keep being amazed at the tremendous skill it takes to write a good book that will stand the test of time and perhaps one day be considered a classic."

—Harriet Sider Bicksler

by Veronica H. Dyck

How to start a readers' group

For some time I had been aware of a growing sense of envy whenever I heard about another readers' group, the interesting books being discussed and the friendships inspired by this communal undertaking. Enough was enough! In the spring of 1995, I solicited the help of a friend to establish our own group. In researching what this would entail, I found an excellent book: Rachel Jacobsohn's *The Reading Group Handbook* (New York: Hyperion, 1994). Jacobsohn reviews how to start a group, describes the art of discussion and includes titles of books that readers' groups have found valuable.

Many practical considerations need to be decided. How often will the group meet? Will there be one facilitator, or will that duty rotate among the members? How large will the group be? Where will the group meet? Who will be invited? Males? Females? Church connections? New acquaintances? Will refreshments be served? Group dynamics can be unpredictable: What if one or two people dominate the discussion? How can quieter members be encouraged to participate?

My group meets on the last Thursday of the month. Usually 10 women attend, ranging in age from the late 20s to 50s. Everyone is part of a Christian faith community, but not all are Mennonite. Members were invited through a number of connections, so everyone has made new friends. The meeting is always at the same home, but duties like bringing food and doing research on the author rotate. The experience has been richly rewarding. Even with the growing pains of losing and gaining new members, commitment remains strong.

Not everyone has a background in literature, but all members are qualified to share their responses. As Jacobsohn outlines, group discussion of a book is designed to enhance our understanding of the work and our appreciation of the art of writing. It invites us to examine human motivation by reading about how others respond to internal and external circumstances. It also helps us to explore human nature and the meaning of our own life experiences. We establish connections with others by expanding our intellectual horizons.

Good books and good friends nourish our minds and our souls. Anyone who responds to the invitation to share of these gifts will surely be rewarded!

Veronica H. Dyck is a doctoral candidate and on the faculty of religious studies at McGill University. Veronica is a member at Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship in Vancouver, B.C.



"Some of my best memories are of being read to as a child. Our whole family would listen as my father read to us. He would stop at an exciting spot, and I was not allowed to read ahead. I loved reading to my children. Even after they could read for themselves we would snuggle under the quilt and read. The books were as interesting for me as for them. Once again, I'd be told, this time by my children, 'Don't read ahead! You have to wait!'"

—Marjorie Bergen Warkentin

Book lists

Favorite books for the faith journey

Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, *The Crosswicks Trilogy: A Circle of Quiet*, *The Summer of the Great-grandmother*, and *The Irrational Season*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox*, *The Active Life*, *To Know As We Are Known*

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *The Cloister Walk*

Lynda Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred*

Donald Hall, *Lifework*, *The Museum of Clear Ideas*

Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*

Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*, *A Cry for Mercy*, *Gracias*

Henry Cloud, *Boundaries*

Alice Munroe, *Open Secrets*

Fredrick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

Lucy Greely, *Autobiography of a Face*

Paul Tournier, *Learn to Grow Old*, *The Gift of Feeling*

Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*

Harriet Lerner, *Dance of Anger*

Joyce Rupp, *May I Have this Dance?*

William J. Bausch, *Storytelling, Imagination & Faith*

Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*

C. Henry Smith, *Story of the Mennonites*

Harry Loewen, ed., *Why I am a Mennonite—Stories of Mennonite Identity*

Dorothy Yoder Nyce, ed., *Weaving Wisdom: Sermons by Mennonite Women*

Sheila Cassidy, *Sharing the Darkness: The Spirituality of Caring*

Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Seasons of Strength: New Visions of Adult Christian Maturing*.

Mikal Tilmore, *Shot in the Heart*

Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*

Joel Gregory, *Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church*

David Keirse and Marilyn Bates, *Please Understand Me: Character Temperament Types*

Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*

Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, Christ and Violence*

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel, eds., *Out of the Garden: Women Writers in the Bible*

Denise Lardner Carmody, *Responses to 101 Questions about Feminism*

Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*

David Watson, *Fear No Evil*

Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*

Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*

Alice Killer, *An Unknown Woman*

Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace*

Susan Annette Muto, *Womanspirit*

Linda Shierse Leonard, *The Wounded Woman*

Madame Guyon, *Experiencing the Presence of Jesus*

Joann Wolski Conn, *Women's Spirituality*

Lynne Bundesen, *So The Woman Went Her Way*

Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*

Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*

Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*

Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, *Good Goats*

Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*

James Dobson, *Holding Onto Your Faith Even When God Doesn't Make Sense*

Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Unselfishness of God*

Michael King, *Trackless Wastes and Stars to Steer By*

George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*

Paul Smith, *Is it Okay to Call God Mother?*

Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Favorite books for relaxation/entertainment

Robertson Davies, *Deptford Trilogy: Fifth Business, The Manticore, World of Wonders*

Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet, A Small Rain, Two-Part Invention, The Severed Wasp*

Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

Mary O'Hara, *The Scent of Roses*

Phil Jenkins and Ken Ginn, *Fields of Vision: A Journey to Canada's Farms*

Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Revolution, 1985-1995: From Deference to Defiance*

Wayson Choy, *The Jade Peony*

Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, The Accidental Tourist, Saint Maybe, Ladder of Years*

Allan Gurganus, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Sue Miller, *Family Pictures*

Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride, The Handmaid's Tale*

Orson Scott Card, *The Homecoming Series* (five books for science fiction lovers)

Rigoberta Manchu, I, *Rigoberta Manchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*

Dominique Lapierre, *The City of Joy*



Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers*

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*

Phillip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*

Chaim Potok, *Davita's Harp*

C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia, Trilogy: That Hideous Strength, Perelandra, Out of the Silent Planet*

David Gunterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Bean Trees, Pigs in Heaven, Animal Dreams*

David Bergen, *A Year of Lesser*

Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison, Busman's Honeymoon*

E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

Rudy Wiebe, *Discovery of Strangers*

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

Barbara K. Nickel, *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart*

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife, The Joy Luck Club*

Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Stories and the Moral Imagination*

"Giving you information about books is like talking about my family. I'm not really sure where to start. I can't begin to give you a favorite, and I'm not sure that there is any one book that has really helped me. I read murder mysteries, historical fiction and science fiction. Reading diaries, journals or autobiographies reinforces the resiliency of the human spirit and encourages and inspires me."

—Dorothy Martens



Other women who contributed to this issue

Lee Snyder is President of Bluffton College. She attends First Mennonite of Bluffton, Ohio.

Marion McGee is a mother, grandmother and registered nurse, now retired and enjoying books. She attends Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship, Vancouver, B.C.

Ingrid Janzen Lamp was born and raised in Germany. She moved to Saskatchewan in 1964, where she's lived ever since. She attends Zion Mennonite Church in Swift Current, Sask.

Lydia Doerksen has lived and worked for 30 years with her husband, Helmut, at Bienenberg Bible School in Liestal, Switzerland. She is a member at Chensli Gemeinde outside of Basel.

April Yamasaki is a pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, B.C., and author of *Remember Lot's Wife*.

Harriet Sider Bicksler is a publications specialist on children's mental health issues for the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health. She has served on the MCC U.S. Board since 1989, and is a free-lance writer and editor of *Shalom!*, a publication on social issues. She is a member of Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, Grantham, Pa.

Jeanne Houser is 44 years old, has gray hair, a husband, two kids and a big yard. She enjoys friendships, walking, reading, chocolate, family fun and being in the outdoors. She attends New Creation Fellowship Church in Newton, Kan.

Chris Klassen is a student of Religious Studies at University of Waterloo, and attends Olive Branch Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ont.

Mary Raber serves as an MCC Volunteer in the Ukraine. She is originally from St. Louis, Mo., and is an associate member of Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. As a child, Mary's favorite cuddly bedtime toy was an illustrated dictionary.

Janice Kreider is a librarian at the University of British Columbia and a member of Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship. She is on Sabbatical in Oxford, England, where she enjoys being part of an Anglican congregation.

Virginia Kreider lives with her husband, J. Robert, in Goshen, Ind., where they are members of College Mennonite Church. Virginia is past president of the PHALO Club and reads at least a book a week.

Dorothy Martens is pastor of family ministries at Sardis Community Church, Sardis, B.C., and a marriage and family therapist. She has a wry sense of humor and enjoys reading, needlework and cooking.

Christine Wiebe is a member of Lorraine Ave. Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kan. She is an avid reader and writer.

Phyllis Horst Nofziger attends Pilgrims Mennonite Church in Akron, Pa. She leads a children's club, teaches Sunday school, serves on the board of a parent and preschool center and volunteers at her children's school. Her favorite activities center around both children and adult books.

Marjorie Bergen Warkentin is a community health nurse. She enjoys the outdoors, walking, reading and being with friends. She attends Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, B.C.

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Women in Ministry

Joy Lapp served as interim pastor of Mountain Community Mennonite Church in Palmer Lake, Co. from September to December 1996.

Rebecca Kruger Gaudino was ordained to ministry at the Central Congregational United Church of Christ, Atlanta, Ga. She currently serves as co-pastor at the Plymouth Congregational U.C.C. in Tacoma, Wa. She is the daughter of Susan and Harold Kruger of the First Mennonite Brethren Church, Wichita, Kan.

Elsie and Delmer Epp were installed as co-pastors at East Zorra Mennonite Church in Tavistock (Ont.). They previously served as conference ministers for the Conference of Mennonites in Saskatchewan.

Doug and Wanda Roth Amstutz were licensed for ministry in the Allegheny Mennonite Conference and installed as co-pastors of the Mennonite Church of Scottsdale (Pa.)

April Yamasaki was ordained as pastor at Emmanuel Church, Abbotsford, B.C.

Kathleen Rochester is associate pastor of family life at Peace Church, Richmond, B.C.

Claire Osinkosky was licensed and installed as pastor at Trenton (Ohio) Church.

Carrie Harder was licensed as pastoral care worker at Stirling Avenue Church, Kitchener, Ont.

Lois and Tom Harder were licensed and installed as pastors at Lorraine Avenue Church, Wichita, Kan.

Catherine Hunsberger was licensed as pastor at Rainham Church, Selkirk, Ont.

Glyn Jones and Susan Allison-Jones were ordained as pastors at Pacific Covenant Church, Canby, Ore.

Judy Shantz was licensed in November as pastor at Milverton (Ont.) Mennonite Fellowship.

Rebecca Yoder-Neufeld was licensed for ministry at First Church, Kitchener, Ont.

Amanda Falla was ordained at Iglesia Menonita Encuentro de Renovacion, Miami, in December. She and her husband are working in Columbia with the Commission on Overseas Mission.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Gwen Groff. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer Design.

Subscription cost is \$12 U.S./\$15 Cdn. for one year or \$20 U.S./\$25 Cdn. for two years. Send all subscriptions, correspondence and address changes to Editor, MCC Women's Concerns, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Canadian subscribers may pay in Canadian currency.

This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.



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